776 idea of a large and supreme being, which in their language they call ohott-at (others pronounce it hojot-taj) which means 'great spirit,' but they do not worship it. Some of them appear to fear a sort of ghost which goes about at night and harms people and which they call onnexilele; others seem to indulge in a certain superstitious worship of a mysterious being which they call taj-juat, which means 'hidden one,' but without temple or particular place or determined time to render it their adoration. I only know that at the time of the new
●791 moon, some of the Indians commonly get together to sing and dance,
776 and the sorcerers, as they call them, trick them by getting someone to dress up and play the part of taj-juat who, appearing out of the forest strangely garbed and speaking in a feigned tone of voice, frightens the spectators, to whom he predicts future times and events."

881 "But if the Matacos can be said to have no religion, this does not mean that they have no superstitious beliefs. For example, when a girl reaches puberty, she must remain withdrawn for a [604] certain time in a corner of her hut, covered with branches or any other thing, and neither speak to anyone nor eat meat or fish. And while she is thus withdrawn and cut off from the others, one of the village's ceremony masters must be in front of the hut playing the pimpin. When a
846 woman gives birth to a child she must remain lying down for a few days, and the husband must refrain from doing any work or indulging in any occupation for a long time. On occasion a woman has been surprised dancing round a bonfire into which she had thrown her dead child."

756 "Sorcerers also are not lacking among them, these, of course, being the most cunning, and the most feared and respected members of the community, who also play the part of medicasters and priests. In order to be accepted as one of those who follow so important and useful a profession it is enough if one wants to and feels strongly inspired; but first it is necessary that the candidate separate himself for a few days from the rest of the people and go off into the forest, fasting rigorously and going about day and night like a madman in no particular direction, returning then and appearing before the others pale, dirty, emaciated and with frightened eyes like one possessed. From that time on he is recognized as a privileged being who has had secret dealings with "the hidden one" and is possessed of a supernatural power which
[753] enables him to undo any evil bewitchment and eliminate diseases from the sick, it being axiomatic amongst them that nobody sickens or dies from purely natural causes.

said, is a'hót among the Matacos. 776

This confusion frees them, at least in so far as language is concerned, from the vice of intolerance which is so strong with us. So it is that they call our church tohuó-hoto'hi which literally means: "that which contains the a'hóts," that is, "the a'hohi or Christian gods."

This is also the term for cemetery, in which they are in agreement with the inhabitants of those parts who use the word pantheon, which among the Greeks was reserved for demigods and with us for persons of great fame.

In the Chaco and in the whole northern part of the Argentine Republic where people are more democratic, egalitarian, ironical and also ingenuous, the term pantheon is used to denote a plot of cleared, grass covered land. This plot is quite open to access and allows free entrance to jaguars and dogs who go there to feast at the expense of the fresh corpse of a white, Negro or mulatto, but certainly not of a Greek demigod or of even a member of more modern divinity!

At this rate there will come a time when the word pantheon will sound offensive.

Not only are the a'hóts able to enter into people, bewitch 776 them, become incarnate (allow me the neologism) in them and in [202] elements of an evil nature such as storms, smallpox, famine etc. but they are also able to wield daggers and even shoot with bows and arrows.

But it seems that they only indulge in this business of [791] shooting people with arrows when called upon by the witch doctors who, in Mataco, are called "háyagüé," and in Chiriguano, "ippaya." This seems also to be the case with the "gualicho" of the Araucano Indians, who in fact have a verb to express this action, which is "cúllin." The corresponding Mataco verb is "ioco."

It can readily be understood why the witch doctors have 411 chosen the arrow as the preferred weapon of the evil spirit, since 791 it is the only weapon in use among the Indians which lends itself to mystery and deceit because, as it is a projectile it can be loosed from any quarter and from afar, the bowman remaining hidden.

This state of affairs which is found among all the Chaco Indians is present also in the other savage nations of America, though admittedly, there are some -- in North America for instance -- among whom the existence of other invisible and good powers or beings have been recognized, called "manitos" and "oquis" by some.

Regarding this problem the Americans reason rather naively, though with a certain amount of wit: "why should one worry," they say, "about a being who is by nature good? Surely we need fear no evil from him because if he is good he will not wish to harm anyone." A metaphysician would say the same thing.

It must be confessed that all religions are a little weak regarding this (for want of a better term) original sin; for all preach or impose expiatory sacrifices to placate the supreme being's wrath.

Among those Chaco Indians who still preserve some hazy tradition rooted in the missionaries' teachings, a certain ceremony prevails, possibly the only one of a religious nature, which parodies a Christian rite. From time to time they gather around their old men and chiefs, the women on one side, the men on the other. In the center, on a pile of flowers they place an a'hót, a child who is to be a witch doctor. While at these meetings they talk, smoke and drink, and then go their separate ways saying that they have "been at mass." The witch doctors keep up a constant conversation with the God Child (1), and report

1. This function of "Child Witch Doctor" may be an Indian custom because something similar to it is to be found amongst the other Chaco Indians. (Ed.)

back to the people what he says.

In this ceremony as in all others the wizard or witch doctor always bends forward, covers himself, directs his speech downwards toward the ground (beneath the surface of which are the a'hóts). He first speaks in his normal tone of voice and then answers himself in penetrating, muffled tones which he varies to suit the nature of the particular a'hót, and the people think

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that the a'hót is really answering, not realizing that it is a ventriloqual trick.

I have remarked a number of times in these notes that the witch doctors are the mediators between the a'hóts and men, but they are also, in addition to this priestly function, doctors, -- in fact they are priests by reason of their being doctors. [786]

The association of religion with medicine seems to be a constant factor among primitive peoples and also among the uneducated classes of the present civilization. This fact provides fuel for reflection of a philosophic-historical type. According to historians there is every indication that it was already present among the American peoples and even Oviedo mentions coming upon it [204] in the island of Hispaniola. Robertson, that sober and wise historian of America explains the phenomenon succinctly when he says: "Superstition in its primitive form had its roots in man's natural impatience to free himself from a present evil and did not grow out of fear of the evils which awaited him in the life to come. So it is that its origin stems from medicine and not from religion."

I have no indication that the superstition of these Indians goes together with any cruel practice, nor have I read anything to the effect that this is the case among the other American savages.

The luxury of cruelty seems to be the exclusive prerogative of religions, among them being those primitive ones of Perú and, especially, Mexico.

Chapter X

The Cult of Graves

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The Indians practice a "grave cult," and it can be asserted that they have always done so.

Near the city of Santiago del Estero I have seen their burial mounds and the earthen jars they contain.